



Landmark New Laws Approved by Connecticut Legislators Respond to Latino Concerns, Aimed at Improving Quality of Life

Hartford, CT 7/29/15 – A new regimen for training police officers to reduce the use of excessive force, reforms to improve the education of English Language Learners (ELLs), a requirement for hospitals to provide interpreters for patients who do not speak English, and additional funding for new state contracts for minority businesses were among the critical legislative achievements during the 2015 session of the Connecticut General Assembly that will improve the quality of life for Connecticut’s steadily growing Latino population.

That is the assessment of the state’s Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission (LPRAC), which provided expertise to support the initiatives of legislators and the Governor’s Office, consistent with their mission to recommend *“new or enhanced policies that will foster progress in achieving health, safety, educational success, economic self-sufficiency, and end discrimination”* for the state’s Latino and Puerto Rican residents.

The ELL legislation will (1) increase the maximum number of months for bilingual education from 30 to 60 months, (2) increase the supply of bilingual education teachers, (3) increase accountability of school districts for educating ELLs, and (4) allow ELLs to take mastery tests in their native language, among others. LPRAC held a well-attended forum on the issue prior to the start of the legislative session, developing comprehensive data and providing a forum for first-person experiences that proved helpful to legislators considering changes to state policies.

“Although the state budget and fiscal issues dominated the session, there was landmark legislation approved that will advance the quality of life not only for the state’s Latino residents, but all residents across the State of Connecticut,” said Werner Oyanadel, Executive Director of LPRAC.

The legislature also approved a proposal by a coalition of organizations and legislators, including LPRAC, aimed at reducing the excessive use of force by police officers by requiring training on: (1) using physical force, (2) using body-worn recording equipment, and (3) bias-free policing. The law requires the state



Office of Policy and Management to provide grants for municipal police departments to purchase body-worn recording equipment. Law enforcement units are also required to promote the goal of having police departments that are racially, ethnically, and gender diverse.

To encourage economic self-sufficiency, legislators expanded the state contract set-aside for Minority Business Enterprises (MBE) by approximately \$35 million. Public works contracts awarded by municipal and quasi-state agencies are now included in the MBE set-aside, which results in 175 more local, regional, and state government entities looking for minority contractors. In addition, legislators created a long-awaited state-approved apprenticeship program for barbering, which will significantly reduce the cost of becoming a barber in Connecticut.

An additional \$11 million dollars in state funding for K-12 education was approved for cities and towns with the largest Latino populations, and a pilot program aimed at providing education and job readiness services to both children and their parents will operate in several communities. Also related to education, new laws aim to reduce the disproportionately high rate of in-school juvenile arrests among Hispanic youth, reduce chronic absenteeism in K-12 in the state's largest population communities, and make charter schools more accountable and transparent in their operations.

“In public safety, education, and economic opportunity, the legislature took solid action that will provide a better environment for Latino residents to thrive in our state. They grappled with serious issues, made substantial progress, and LPRAC was pleased to support their efforts,” said LPRAC Chairman Richard A. Cruz.

In other legislation approved this year, domestic workers will now receive protections under employment-related anti-discrimination laws, and to incentivize employers to pay their employees fair wages, fines will be doubled for employers who do not provide their employees with the minimum wage and fringe benefits as required by state law.

Some progress was made to improve the health of Latinos in Connecticut. Acute care hospitals must provide interpreter services for patients whose primary language is spoken by at least 5 percent of the population residing in the hospital's geographic service area. Funding for teen pregnancy prevention programs, not



included in the budget proposed by the Governor, was restored by the legislature. Lower thresholds were established for when parents must be informed that their children have lead in their blood.

In higher education, in-state tuition at the state's public higher education institutions is to be extended to students who have completed at least two years of high school in Connecticut. Previous law required four years in a Connecticut high school to be eligible for in-state tuition.

Also in the realm of public safety, legislation was approved that decreases criminal penalties and increases parole eligibility when convicted for a crime before age 18. Criminal penalties for drug possession (without intent to sell) were also reduced, and the parole process was expedited for those convicted of a nonviolent crime. In addition, requirements that are more restrictive were put in place to reduce the transfer of cases from juvenile court to criminal court.

One area of disappointment during the legislative session related to housing. Latino communities in Connecticut are among the top five most residentially segregated in the country, and increasing the availability of housing outside of urban areas for low-income families remains a priority. Among a number of substantive proposals, only one bill passed, which requires the Connecticut Department of Housing to create a residence mobility-counseling program to help certain individuals or families relocate to higher opportunity areas.

LPRAC, for the record, is a nonpartisan policy agency within the Legislative branch of government created in 1994 by an Act of the Connecticut Legislature. Under Public Act 09-07, the LPRAC consists of 21 appointed volunteers who are mandated to advise the General Assembly and the Governor on policies that foster progress in the Puerto Rican and Latino communities residing in Connecticut.

A complete summary of legislative policy supported by LPRAC during the 2015 General Assembly session, along with highlights of legislation passed during the session, can be reviewed at the LPRAC website at www.cga.ct.gov/lprac.